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Claudia Rosenhan

AN ATTRIBUTION IN HUXLEY'S SHORT STORY 'CHAWDRON' VIA LAWRENCE AND LUDOVICI

Aldous Huxley's story 'Chawdron,' published in Brief Candles in 1930,¹ contains an episode in which literary journalist Edmund Tilney reveals his incurable liking for 'bitches'. One of these pro-active women was Sybil, 'lovely and fatal,' not least to herself. Caught in the moment of recollection Tilney continues:

Poor Sybil! I could cry when I think of that inevitable course of hers, that predestined trajectory. [...] She had just passed the crest when I knew her. The descending branch of the curve was horribly steep. What depths awaited her! That horrible little East-Side Jew she even went to the trouble of marrying! And after the Jew, the Mexican Indian (315).

It is this detailed description, especially of her marital history, which makes her so intriguing. She is, after all, only a remembered figure from Tilney's past and serves as a whimsical example of the fatal and fatalistic sexual attraction Huxley attributed to the moderns. Yet her dynamic portrait invites readers to ascribe to Sybil a profile based on a historical person, a well-established critical practice with many of Huxley's writings.

I suggest that a clue to Sybil's likely model is provided by a letter D. H. Lawrence wrote to Frieda's mother on 5 December 1922:

You asked about Mabel Dodge: American – rich – only child – from Buffalo, on Lake Erie – bankers – 42 years old – short, stout – looks young – has had three husbands – an Evans (dead), a Dodge (divorced), and a Maurice Sterne (Jew, Russian, painter, young) (also divorced). Has now an Indian, Tony, a fat fellow.²

Mabel Dodge, née Ganson, married Maurice Sterne in 1916. The marriage to Tony Luhan took place in 1923. She was an extraordinary woman and it can be safely concluded that not many society women

¹ References to 'Chawdron' are taken from Huxley's Collected Short Stories, (Chicago, 1992), 302 – 36.

² The Letters of D. H. Lawrence, (ed. Warren Roberts, James T. Boulton, and Elizabeth Mansfield, Cambridge, 1987), IV, 13.

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could produce such a range of husbands. Huxley did not meet Mabel Dodge Luhan personally until he moved to the United States and briefly settled near Taos in 1937, so any information about her utilised in this story must have been filtered through Lawrence's point of view. Lawrence told Mabel in 1926 'I was talking to Aldous Huxley about Intimate Memories [Mabel's autobiographical project], and he was pining to read them.'³ This indicates that the American patroness was a topic of discussion between the two writers, and that Huxley was interested in her life story. Lawrence must have given Huxley his impression of the relationship, because even Mabel detected an instinctive reaction by the English writer and his wife to her lover:

The Lawrences seemed to be intensely conscious of Tony and somehow embarrassed by him. I made out, in the twinkling of an eye, that Frieda immediately saw Tony and me sexually, visualizing our relationship. I experienced her swift, female measurement of him, and how the shock of acceptance made her blink.⁴

On hearing about their marriage, Frieda wrote to Bessie Freeman 'In my head I say: why not, but somewhere else it's so impossible'.⁵ Lawrence also must have voiced some objections, otherwise he would not have apologised to Mabel:

About his relation to you, yours to him, I would never venture seriously to judge. (You really shouldn't mind the things one says casually—only the things one says really, having considered.).⁶

Yet despite any possible minor misgivings, there is no evidence that D. H. Lawrence held any prejudices on racial grounds. On the contrary, he defended Tony Luhan against European ignorance and hypocrisy:

But the way they [in Florence] talk of Tony makes me so mad. 'I hear he comes to dinner in his war-paint!'—So I said: 'And why not? Doesn't your mother, and all the rest of your female friends? Tony is just as well bred.'⁷

³ The Letters of D. H. Lawrence, (ed. James T. Boulton and Lindeth Vasey, Cambridge, 1989), V, 567.

⁴ Mabel Dodge Luhan, Lorenzo in Taos, (New York, 1932, rpt. New York, 1969), 36 – 7.

⁵ The Letters of D. H. Lawrence, (ed. Warren Roberts, James T. Boulton, and Elizabeth Mansfield, Cambridge, 1987), IV, 450.

⁶ The Letters of D. H. Lawrence, (ed. James T. Boulton and Lindeth Vasey, Cambridge, 1989), V, 129.

⁷ The Letters of D. H. Lawrence, (ed. James T. Boulton and Margaret H. Boulton with Gerald Lacy, Cambridge, 1991), VI, 223.

The question remains why Tilney's speech presents an image of Sybil with distinct overtones of scientific racialism, and explicitly why her marriages to a Jew and an Indian are used as pointers of her personal degeneration. To begin with, it should be made plain that Mabel Luhan is not Sybil (there are clearly enough discrepancies in the life history of the two women to refute a one-to-one analogy), but that hearing of her personal background prompted in Huxley an artistic reaction of how to utilise this piece of singular information.

Both Huxley and Lawrence were certainly aware of the re-emergence of fin-de-siècle fears of racial degeneration, broadcast by writers like Robert Reid Rentoul, Charles Armstrong or Anthony Ludovici.⁸ In addition, American queries over racial identities and emerging discourses about race and sexuality featured in the notorious miscegenation laws included American Indians amongst its list of forbidden conjugal partners for 'Whites'.⁹ Voiced from an anthropological, biological or cultural standpoint, these eugenic exegeses of 'race-mixing' inform Huxley's critique of modern sexuality. Tilney is thus a character for whom 'race' is a marker for social hierarchy and morality. In his eyes, Sybil's marriage to a Jew was hierarchically less reprehensible than that to a 'Mexican Indian', mirroring the European prejudice against the 'primitive'.¹⁰ Satirically the climax, and an interesting insight into the social construction of racial ideologies, is the fact that Sybil ends her life as a cocaine addict married to a 'Chinaman'.

Tilney's description of Sybil's disgrace satirically overreaches the factual information Huxley gathered from the Lawrences. This is because for Huxley 'race' was a 'political nonsense-conductor', a catchword merely intended to encourage hatred.¹¹ Even though Huxley was clearly not immune to prejudicial

⁸ As Nietzsche's translator Ludovici must have been known to Lawrence. Ludovici and Huxley shared an enthusiasm for the teachings of F. M. Alexander. For further information see Dan Stone, Breeding Superman: Nietzsche, Race and Eugenics in Edwardian and Interwar Britain, (Liverpool, 2002).

⁹ Peggy Pascoe's detailed examination of American miscegenation laws gives valuable background information on this issue. What stands out is that New Mexico does not appear to have had a miscegenation legislation. Hence, one would assume, Mabel Luhan's marriage to Tony was socially and legally accepted. See Peggy Pascoe, 'Miscegenation Law, Court Cases, and Ideologies of 'Race' in Twentieth-Century America', The Journal of American History, lxxxiii (1996), 44 – 69.

¹⁰ Jews were castigated for being primitive as well as over-civilised.

¹¹ 'The Race Racket', Aldous Huxley's Hearst Essays, (ed. James Sexton, New York, 1994), 227 – 8. Huxley called on scientists to examine the supposed 'scientific claim' on the separateness of the Jewish race in 'Race', Aldous Huxley's Complete Essays, (ed. Robert S. Baker and James Sexton, Chicago, 2001), IV, 133. Huxley's brother Julian, in collaboration with A. C. Haddon, also asked for the term 'race' to be eliminated from any discourse dealing with human beings in We Europeans: A Survey of 'Racial' Problems, (1935).

attitudes towards Indians,¹² it was not his intention in 'Chawdron' to provide anti-Semites and racists with a literary mouthpiece or to personally attack Mabel Dodge Luhan.

In the quoted episode, terms like 'inevitable' and 'predestined', along with 'foreseeable', 'nemesis' and 'fate' in the wider context, hint at Huxley's debunking of the mythical divine insight of the Sibylline oracle, whose prophetic powers fail to foresee her own downfall. This tragic irony, expounded by Ovid's description of the Sibyl granted with an extended life but without perpetual youth in the fourteenth book of *Metamorphoses*, is converted into the symbol of shattered hope for regeneration and fruitfulness Eliot so forcefully expressed in his epigraph to *The Waste Land*.¹³ Huxley, as ever aware of the many-layered correspondences between myth, history and literature transports this aspect into his examination of modern relationships, which are often marred by this analogous tragic irony. 'Sybil' thus becomes a label for a character whose hopeless, fruitless and sterile life is illustrated by a succession of 'miscegenic' marriages. The reader who relishes this glimpse into the murky depths of a hedonistic existence is then shocked into the realisation that it is not Sybil who is under the critical scrutiny of the author, but Chawdron and Maggie, the spiritual vampires whose relationship is ten times more vulgar, sordid and nauseating than the love Mabel Luhan has felt for her 'Indian-buck lover'.¹⁴

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¹² He famously debunked Lawrence's adulation of Indian culture in his travel-book *Beyond the Mexique Bay*, (1934).

¹³ Based on Petronius's *Satyricon*, 48.8.

¹⁴ Harry T. Moore, *The Intelligent Heart*, (Harmondsworth, 1960), 391.